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ABSTRACT

If literacy is defined as the ability to read and write, in the context of Hong Kong, literacy is more commonly known as language proficiency. The introduction of the Hong Kong Extensive Reading Scheme in English (HKERS) in 1991 aimed to motivate the students to read and thus enhance their English proficiency. Yet, as of 2001, after a decade since its introduction, motivating students to read more English is still a daunting job. The attitude towards English reading among the students of Hong Kong remains negative, and the motivation to read stays at the same low level. Concern about declining English proficiency among the students is still widespread. If biliteracy (mastered written Chinese and English) and trilingualism (speak fluent Cantonese, Putonghua, and English) are the ultimate aims of Hong Kong is education policy on language proficiency, then that policy is a long way from realizing its goals. This paper attempts to look into the reasons why the English proficiency level has not changed much since the introduction of the HKERS and suggest what can be done further to make HKERS work best for the students of Hong Kong. It is suggested that general reading skills be strengthened, a favorable environment for reading be created, labeling be eliminated, the connection between reading and writing be more effectively understood, and a wide selection of authentic and relevant reading materials be made available. (Contains 17 references.) (KFT)

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What we know after a decade of Hong Kong Extensive Reading Scheme

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Abstract

If literacy is narrowly defined as the ability to read and write, in the context of Hong Kong, literacy is more commonly known as language proficiency. The introduction of the Hong Kong Extensive Reading Scheme in English (HKERS) in 1991 aimed to motivate the students to read and thus enhance their English proficiency. Yet, as of today after a decade since its introduction, motivating students to read more English is still a daunting job for the English teachers of Hong Kong. The attitude towards English reading among the students of Hong Kong remains negative and the motivation to read stays at the same low level. Concern about the declining English proficiency among the students is still widespread. If "Biliterate (master written Chinese and English) and trilingual (speak fluent Cantonese, Putonghua and English)" is the ultimate aim of the Hong Kong education policy on language proficiency as addressed in the Education Commission Report No.6 (ECR-6) in 1996 which is entitled "Enhancing Language Proficiency: A Comprehensive Strategy", one might want to forget about trilingual at least for now since to the students, even being biliterate still has a long way to go. This paper attempts to look into the reasons on why the English proficiency level has not changed much changed since the introduction of HKERS and suggest what can be done further to make HKERS work best for the students of Hong Kong.

Introduction

It has been a decade since the introduction of the Hong Kong Extensive Reading Scheme in English (HKERS) by the Education Department in 1991. It is intended to offer the students an "essential extra exposure" to comprehensible English outside English classes so that the English proficiency of the students can be enhanced (Teacher's manual, 1991, p.2). Judging from the widespread outcry from the public regarding the general decline of the English proficiency level, it looks like such aim has not been materialized. Even the government officials made similar complaints. For instance, Raymond Young, deputy secretary of the education and manpower bureau, said, "English is a foreign language despite 150 years of British rule. We have had English-medium teaching for 50 years, but look at the results - 12-year-olds can't utter a coherent English sentence" (Spencer, 1999). The reasons behind are complex and beyond the scope of discussion in this paper. What this paper attempts to do is to focus only the HKERS, one of the many measures taken by the Education Department to enhance English proficiency.

The Hong Kong Extensive Reading Scheme

The Hong Kong Extensive Reading Scheme in English Scheme was first introduced to secondary 1 to secondary 3 (grade 7 - 9 in U.S. system) of secondary schools in September 1991 and was extended to the primary schools in the 1995-96 school year. In the 1997-98 academic year, around 138,000 students from 199 secondary schools and 124 primary schools took part in the scheme. The Chinese and English Extensive Reading Scheme was extended to all secondary levels over four years started from 1997.

A locked door without a key

Students who participate in the HKERS have learned English as a subject for at least six years in their primary schools. Yet, hardly would they learn any particular second language reading skills throughout all these years in the English class. It probably resembles what Dubin and Bycina (1991) described, "...too often foreign or second language reading instruction has simply been used as a vehicle through which to teach structure and lexis of the language rather than the skill or reading" (p.198). Without any reading skills, what the students of Hong Kong can count on is their dictionaries when they read English. It is a tedious and slow decoding process because they thought it helped their comprehension if they knew the meaning of every single word in their English reading. Contrary to their beliefs, a slow reading rate actually reduces rather than ensures their understanding of the text. According to Fry (1975), quoted by Dubin and Bycina (1991), it is estimated that reading at a rate of 200 words per minute appears to be he minimum in order to read with full comprehension (p.198). No wonder English reading comprehension is a constant failure for the students of Hong Kong. Such feeling of failure, perception of difficulty and anticipation of tremendous among of efforts needed to succeed are all possible factors that deter them from English reading. (Ormrod, 1995, p.443). Omaggio (1986) rightly depicted this gloomy picture as follows:

For second language readers, the reading task often becomes a laborious decoding process, mainly because they lack knowledge of the code, as well as knowledge of the cultural context of the reading material, which can often be as foreign as the language in which they are reading (p.150).

To the students of Hong Kong, the door to successful English reading is locked. The right key to unlock the door lies in the second language reading skills that they should have obtained through classroom instruction. Dubin and Bycina (1991) rightly suggested that "...ESL/EFL students need to be introduced to a variety of strategies which can aid them with the specialized purpose of learning new subject content through reading" (p.200).

A room without windows

The mechanics of the HKERS starts with a test given to the participating students to determine what level the students should be in and thus what level of books they should pick to read. The test is made available by Edinburgh project on Extensive Reading (EPER) from the University of Edinburgh in United Kingdom. The reading and supporting materials are also supplied by EPER. These materials are divided into eight readability level. In each level, there are 50 titles. Most of them are published mainly in the United Kingdom and the level of readability is determined by the number of pages and vocabularies. There are subsequent tests to monitor the progress of the students. After they pass these tests, they get promoted to another upper level. On the other hand, if they fail, they will get demoted to a lower level.

The class time suggested by the HKERS is two to three periods, which last from 80 to 120 minutes per week or cycle. There is no need of a special room for the HKERS lessons. The typical picture of the HKERS is a classroom of around 40 students sitting quietly in their own seats reading one of the 50 titles of their level throughout the 80 to 120 minutes. Sitting in front of the whole class, teachers monitor their progress and make sure rules of silence will be kept.

Even if the reason behind the set up of readability levels is legitimate, the criteria established for the differentiation appears to be not comprehensive enough by simply base on the number of page and vocabulary. Other factors such as the plot of the story should also be taken into consideration. Plus, such setting will limit the students' choice of books to 50 per each level only because even the student find a book interesting from another level, he or she still cannot reach it because it is not "within his or her level". Interest in a book is one of the important driving forces for children to read. Crushing such interest works against the intrinsic motivation that the HKERS wanted to create in the first place. "Children deserve access to interesting content even when their reading abilities do not match the demands of the texts containing that content" (Roller, 1996, p.47). Interest in the content of the reading materials should always come first.

Worse, the traditional physical setting of the Hong Kong classroom poses itself a tense reading environment which deters students from English reading. Reading English, to the students of Hong Kong is already a widely known intense exercise. Now it is getting worse because they get trapped in the classroom for a lengthier period because of the HKERS. Sitting still for 80 to 120 minutes and reading a limited choice of books perhaps sounds too much attention span to ask from a junior secondary school student aged from 12 to 15. Under such circumstances, how can they possibly find any enjoyment in reading? If the HKERS is right on their argument that "the key to progress is enjoyment" (Teacher's manual, 1991, p.1), it is almost a mission impossible for the students to make any progress in English reading in the reading environment set up by the HKERS.

The labeling of the students in a certain reading level in HKERS could possibly stir up negative feelings towards reading as well. In the students' mind, the different readability level might imply different abilities. It will not only create an unnecessary competitive and thus tense reading environment, but also leads to detrimental emotional responses that eventually destroy the children's motivation to read. "Matthew Effect", referred by Roller (1996) as "the rich growing richer while the poor grow poorer" (p.8), will come to play. The intrinsic motivation of the students to read might be considerably undermined.

As mentioned before, in the HKERS, there are only a total of 400 choices available for the students and in each level, the choice is limited to 50. For an extensive reading project with such aggressive objective as the HKERS, the number of 50 books at a certain level is awfully low. "To succeed in a reading workshop, children must choose books they both want to read and can read" (Roller, 1996, p.43). In order to make this happen, "Choice is only as wide as the alternatives available. Classrooms must have many books and other print materials available. And these must include materials on a wide array of topics...The range must be as wide as possible..." (Roller, 1996, p.45). The greater variety of choices of reading materials that are available for the students, the easier they will find books or any other reading materials that are interesting to them. The more interest they show in the books of their choice, the more they can engage themselves in the reading. In turn, they are more motivated to read.

When Allen (1995) said, "Literacy is not taught in isolation from life...Literacy learning and growth occurred for Candy (a student) when she (the student) had a real purpose and a real audience" (p.10), she stressed how important the role of authenticity

is in literacy learning. Knutson (1998) also said, "In both real-world and classroom situations, purpose affects the reader's motivation, interest, and manner of reading" (p.1). Readers will only be motivated to develop their literacy with a relevant and authentic purpose and reading materials. In the HKERS, the reading materials are mainly published in the United Kingdom. How many of these titles are actually tied with the needs or being authentic to the lives of the Hong Kong local students is a big question. Association and connection with the books are remote if there is any. Quoted by Allen (1995), Meek (1982) advised "No adolescent learners to read in a vacuum, with artificial reading matter and no purpose of his own. He needs real books, real intentions and real help an he ought to have all of these" (p.23). Allen (1995) also asserted that "As students become more honestly connected to their reading, they usually see a purpose for reading and want to continue" (p.95). Roller (1996) added further that "The type of learning that occurs at home capitalizes on intrinsic motivation…As children are doing something they enjoy and following their interests, they learn…they are more likely to read texts that tell them something they want to know" (p.45). In summary, without proper authentic reading material for the HKERS, it will be extremely difficult if not totally impossible to motivate the students to read. The inauthentic and irrelevant reading materials in the HKERS, therefore, undermine the degree of its success to achieve its goal.

In short, books work like windows, which open up the new horizons for the learners. Without the authentic and relevant reading materials, the HKERS becomes a dark room without the windows that would help the students to explore and open up the new world.

A house without a foundation

The aim of HKERS is to expose the students to more English reading materials outside their regular English class so that their English proficiency can be enhanced. And as suggested in the teacher's manual (1991), the rationale behind it is:

> ...the more books the students read, the more English they learn, the more English they learn, the more they enjoy reading, the more they enjoy reading, the faster they read the books, the faster they read books, the more books they read... (p.1).

Such rationale reflects the fundamental principle of "practice makes perfect". When applied here, it means that the more English books the students read, the more proficient in English they will be. There might be grounds to this cause and effect relationship only if the sole purpose of reading English books is to improve English. To some highly motivated students who would love to brush up their English, this could probably be the case. Practice might be the way out for them. To the majority of the students, who lack the motivation, however, they might find the whole reading scheme has nothing to do with them.

Another question presented in the process within the rationale suggested by the HKERS is the casual relationship between "the more English they learn" and "the more they enjoy reading". In a way, it might be true if English reading is merely a decoding process. When the learner's English has improved, the decoding process becomes relatively less complicated and difficult if one's English has been improved. The successful experience of decoding might then become a source of joy. Yet, reading

English as a second language is not all about decoding. In fact, the joy of reading is coming from the content of the book, which the readers find it interesting.

If the goal of the HKERS is to raise the level of proficiency in English, the program should not be on reading only. Based on the goal, the design of the program should be more comprehensive in nature which should include at least the writing aspect in the program if not listening and speaking which are also the crucial elements of a language. Thus, it is sad but true that the goal set by the program will actually never be achieved by the execution of the program even it is done perfectly.

To summarize, if the HKERS is only built on the single base of "practice makes perfect", apparently, it is not strong enough to healthily support a project with such a far-reaching goal. The HKERS stands like a house without a strong foundation and the rationale behind it just does not hold up.

Suggested changes

Like building a house, a solid foundation is critical. It is the prerequisite for all the other things built on it. Likewise, only with a solid philosophical base will the HKERS be able to help motivating the students to read more English.

First, reading should be pragmatic and purposeful. By applying Dewey's words, "knowledge is not learned for its own sake, but to be used…it is purposeful"(Ediger, M. 1997) Skills to read is knowledge. Reading, therefore has to be purposeful. Reading material should be authentic and relevant to the students to make reading purposeful. Second, reading is "autonomy". According to Piaget, the purpose of education is the development of autonomy and thus, learners should be free to manipulate their learning at their own pace and in their own interest. (Aldridge & Eddowes,1994). Students should

therefore be allowed to pick any book, magazine or newspaper they like inside or outside the classroom with the guidance from the teachers when needed. Third, reading grows in a favorable environment. Dewey said, "those engaged in the work of educating the nation's school children to accept the responsibility for shaping an environment whose surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth" (Ediger, M. 1997) It is the interaction between the learner and the environment which determines the process of learning. Montessori also suggested that the classroom environment should be warm and comfortable for the children and foster independent and active learning. (2000, November/December, Early Childhood Today) Piaget took a different perspective but reached the same conclusion that "children do not internalize knowledge from the outside in, but construct knowledge from the inside out through interacting with the environment" (Aldridge & Sexton, 1997). As reading is part of the process of learning, a favorable environment has to be set up for reading.

Strengthening reading skills

A separate class time should be allocated for teaching students the needed second language reading skills and strategies to take on the challenge of English reading. With proper reading skills and strategies, psychologically, the students will perceive the reading task in a more positive manner because both the anticipated difficulty and anxiety level in reading English will be lowered. The successful taste of success in English reading will no longer be something out of reach. All these facilitate the upward spiral movement in motivation to read.

Creating favorable reading environment

A special reading room should be set aside for reading purpose only. It should be literacy rich. Books should be easily assessed and reached by every student. A friendly, warm and comfortable environment should be created in the special reading room to foster an enjoyable reading environment. As what Allen (1995) said, "If I (the teacher) want my students to read, there must be a large number of books available right in the room...a print-rich environment...Any unnecessary binding rule should be dropped to foster a comfortable and risk free environment for students to read" (p.30).

Eliminating labeling

By setting up a "desired" level that all students should be, the HKERS actually compromises the individual differences of students. It will only alienate the students further from reading more English. No wonder Allen (1995) suggests that a reading class should be "a class that started where each person was and not where he or she should be; a class that gave room and support for growth toward individual goals, not those of a scope and sequence chart" (p.13). The elimination of the 8 levels of readability, therefore, should be seriously considered. Perhaps, the personal reminder of Roller (1996), "I am always guarding against fitting children to goals instead of fitting goals to children."(p. 26) should be echoed among the designers of the HKERS. The architects of the HKERS should also be prepared to answer question raised by Allen (1995) that, "I wonder how many times we plan activities for our students from where we are, not from where they are?" (p.40)

By differentiating the students into different reading levels, the HKERS generates a labeling effect, which could be devastating. It stigmatizes the child, negatively affect the child's self esteem, make people think of what the individual cannot do instead of

what she or he can or might be able to learn to do. (Heward, 2000, p.8) Labeling should therefore be eliminated also. Instead of creating a competitive reading environment to compel students to read, cultivating their interest in reading might be the key to the final success.

Worst of all, according to the HKERS, students who have difficulty should be moved down from a reading level. The effect of this can be severely detrimental to the students' self-confidence, self-pride and of course their motivation to read. All students should be allowed to take their time to reach whatever level they can reach. As what Roller (1996) claimed, "teachers to do is to set a positive expectation for difference...variability in reading ability is normal and to be expected, all the children can learn to read if they are allowed to progress at their own pace and we are a helping class" (p.55). In fact, not only the teachers, but the administrators, government officials as well as parents should also expect such variation in reading ability. The bottom line is to have the learners achieve their optimal potential without setting a one for all achievement level for every individual learner.

Providing wide selection of authentic and relevant reading materials

A total of 400 titles for each school in the HKERS are absolutely inadequate. Besides, most of them were written outside the Hong Kong context. Students could hardly relate them to their lives. The choice of reading materials, therefore, should be expanded to all the collections in the school library as well as any other public libraries. "When children are free to choose their own instructional topics and materials, they can choose suitably. Their choices can accommodate their abilities rather than define them as 'disabled'" (Roller, 1996, p.9). Moreover, choice making "allows the children to take

control of their own reading and writing activities...children can plan how they will allot the time. Planning allows them to take responsibility for their own learning. (Roller, 1996, p.15)

Connecting reading with writing

How good one can be in a language if one can only read but cannot write. In fact, reading and writing are closely related in literacy development. As what Roller (1996) said, "Writing is a partner to reading and an integral part of learning language...reading and writing constantly influence each other. The act of writing provides opportunities for learning the sound-letter relationships that help reading. Knowing a sound letter relationship in reading can help in writing" (p.99). Therefore, if the goal of the program is to enhance language proficiency, in short term, it should at least integrate writing in the program. In long term, it should include both listening and speaking elements as well in order to achieve the goal set by HKERS.

Conclusion

By all account, the HKERS is definitely a step in the right direction. It can also be considered as innovative as it is the very first educational reform so far that focus on English reading only. Just like what Hawkins (1991) proclaimed, "...increased ESL reading skills reciprocally contribute to increased general ESL proficiency..." (p.175). Reading itself is important to the language proficiency or literacy development. The Education Department deserves all the credit that it takes the initiative to put such program in place. Yet, their efforts and the scope of the program are still limited at least from the resource allocation point of view. According to the recommended phased implementation of ECR-6, the implementing of the extensive Reading and Writing

Schemes is in Phase II, which is "to commence as soon as resources are secured". The financial implications of the first phase of the implementation of ECR-6, only 1 million in four years, not even 1 percent out of a total spending of 200.3 million in enhancing language proficiency programs, is spent on reading and writing schemes and in Phase II. If the basic premise of the whole education reform is as what the Foreword of the Review of education system reform proposal in May 2000 said to enable every individual to pursue all-round development through life-long learning, such allocation of resources on reading and writing is totally out of proportion. In order to become a life-long learner, being able to read and write is the prerequisite. Obviously, there is still much room for improvement that the Education Department has to undertake. If the Education Department is not going to re-evaluate the whole resource allocation, the fault will always rest on them.

Undeniably, English to non-native English speakers such as the students of Hong Kong is a subject to learn, such as its grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and so on. Yet, they have to bear in mind that learning English is not because they want to learn English as a subject but because it is a means to an end. It is the prerequisite tool, a language which is used to acquire all kinds of knowledge. In Raphael & Heibert's words (1996), "Literacy is a set of psychological tools that can facilitate learning in specific subject matter areas" (p.85). "Literacy (reading and writing) reflects 'higher mental processes' learned through their meaningful use across multiple contexts within and beyond the classroom" (p.19) To them, there is still a long way for the HKERS to go before it can call itself a success.

After the very first difficult and huge step has been taken by the HKERS, what it needs to do to move closer to the road of success might be another major push to remodel the course it is going forward. The project can then prove itself to be beneficial to all the students of Hong Kong.

If Raphael & Heibert (1996) are right on their argument that "Literacy is a higher psychological process, it is not 'natural', it is learned" (p.19), it is certainly our responsibility as educators to help our next generation to learn literacy. At the same time, we have to accept the fact that variability is a rule rather than an exception. "Variability in reading ability is normal and to be expected, all the children can learn to read if they are allowed to progress at their own pace and we are a helping class." (Roller, 1996, p.55). Last but not least, we must also always remind ourselves that "The fault was not the children's. The children can learn to read....The fault belongs to general organization patterns for delivering reading instruction" (Roller, 1996, p. 7).

To conclude, the students of Hong Kong needs to have the right key to unlock the door so that they can go into the room of a house sitting on a strong foundation and with windows to all kinds of information, joy and experiences waiting for them to explore and discover. Only with the concerted efforts made by the HKERS to enrich its philosophical base, to equip the students with the second language reading skills and to provide authentic and relevant reading materials will it work to the best benefits of the students of Hong Kong.

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